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Epiphany • Ephesians 3:1–12 • January 4, 2015

Joel Okamoto

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, okamotoj@csl.edu

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Epiphany • Ephesians 3:1–12 • January 4, 2015

Okamoto: Epiphany • Ephesians 3:1–12

Notes on the Pericope

The Old Testament people knew *that* God had promised life and salvation to all nations (e.g., see Genesis 12:3 and Isaiah 60:1–6, the appointed OT lesson), but they did not know *how* he would do that. God made this clear through his Son and in the witness of the apostles. Paul's letter to the Ephesians both explains this and offers God's promises to all people.

From Sinai on, the requirements of the law had distinguished Jews from Gentiles. But, in his life, death, and resurrection, Christ brought down the “middle wall of partition”

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(KJV; τὸ μεσότηχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ) made of “the law of commandments” (Eph 2:14–15). In his life, he did not strictly uphold the Law, and he openly engaged and brought blessings to sinners, Samaritans, Canaanites, and other Gentiles. He did so, even to the point of being rejected and crucified (2:16; cf. Gal 3:10–14; 4:4–7). But, God raised Jesus from dead, which vindicated Jesus on all counts, including his stance toward the law and toward Gentiles. Now, instead of the law separating Jews and Gentiles, God offered salvation apart from works of the law to both Jews and Gentiles. As Paul explained, Gentiles had become “fellow heirs (συγκληρονόμα) and members of the body (σῶσωμα) and partakers (συμμέτοχα) of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6).

Paul calls this “the mystery of Christ” (3:4; see also 3:3 and 3:9; cf. Romans 11:25–32 and Colossians 1:24–29). God had long kept it hidden (3:9), not revealing in the past as it was now (3:5). But, in Christ Jesus, God had now accomplished his eternal purpose (3:11). God was revealing his plan through the apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit (3:5) to all humankind (3:9) and even to the spiritual “principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (3:10). Paul himself was a minister of this gospel (3:7), preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles (3:8).

Notes for Preaching

As with other major festivals, Epiphany gives preachers the opportunity to review God’s plan and work of salvation and to draw their hearers into that account. Epiphany’s particular theme is the revelation to all nations of God’s reign and salvation through Jesus Christ.

A sermon based on this pericope could begin with the point that one can appreciate fully what this revelation to all nations means for us only when one understands to what “all” should be compared. In this case, the contrast is not “all or nothing,” as seems often to be thought. It is not “all or some,” either. It is “all or one.” Under the old covenant, when the law of Moses was in effect, there was “one nation under God”: Israel. The rest—the Gentiles—were aliens and strangers as far as life and salvation were concerned (Eph 2:11–12). And, if that had not changed, then most of us who call ourselves God’s people would have remained outsiders.

What happened? What changed? Those are the questions to address. The answer is, of course, Jesus. In his life, death, and resurrection, he brought an end to the old covenant, including the reign of the law, and he called for followers to be made of all nations—not just Israel (Mt. 28)—and sent apostles like Paul to all people (Eph 3:1)—not just Jews. Moreover, “what happened” is that the message and the promises of God came to us, in our time and place, and we have become “fellow heirs and members of the body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6).

The sermon might conclude by asking “what now?” Here one could follow Paul himself, who urged the Ephesians to lead lives worthy of their calling (Eph 4:1) and to “walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8), not in darkness or ignorance (Eph 4:17–18; 5:8–11), which echoes the Old Testament lesson: “Rise, shine, for our light has come.”

Joel P. Okamoto